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AUTHOR Moles, Oliver; Collins, Carter
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of an ongoing study of home school programs incorporating the fourth through twelfth grade levels of large urban school districts. It examines the nature and scope of programs designed to improve student learning through parent involvement in tutoring, managerial and socializing activities as they relate to educational practice. Programs are classified according to goals for students such as achievement, social development, attendance, and career plans, and according to modes of home school interaction, parent school and parent child activities. Also included is a review of selected home school programs and a set of general guidelines, objectives, and activities for prospective home school programs. (JCD)

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HOME-SCHOOL PROGRAMS OF URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

By

Oliver Moles

Carter Collins

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
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HOME-SCHOOL PROGRAMS OF URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS*

Oliver Moles and Carter Collins
National Institute of Education
Washington, D.C. 20208

Introduction

This paper reports the results to date of a study of programs in big cities designed to involve parents in the education of their children. School systems in the cities were asked to provide information on any of their programs which might help parents to act in several educational capacities (1) as home tutors, (2) as monitors of homework and attendance, (3) as guides for their children in the use of community educational resources, or (4) engaging in other home activities to improve student learning. This study is restricted to programs and practices in the upper elementary and secondary levels (4th-12th grade). Much more is known about parent involvement activities with younger children; the techniques and strategies for engaging parents with older children's learning are much less developed.

This work stems from the intent of the NIE Families as Educators Team to explore forms of home-school collaboration which may help improve student learning. We are members of that team. A Central problem is how parents can be helped to exercise their responsibility more effectively, particularly for those students who are not learning well.

Big cities were chosen because they contain many students who are not achieving well. This usually includes large numbers from low-income and minority families who have traditionally faced restricted educational opportunities. Big city school systems presumably have more resources available to develop and sustain innovations to encourage parent collaboration.

* Paper presented at the American Education Research Association Meetings, Los Angeles, April 15, 1981.

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Framework

This study has several purposes. The first is internal - simply to learn more about ongoing programs and thereby help the Families as Educators team understand the current state of educational practice in this area. The second is to share this newly-organized information with others by means of a directory and description of the programs identified. The third is to use the information obtained to pinpoint unanswered questions in need of further investigation.

Key dimensions of the concept of parents as educators are the following:

1. parents explicitly teaching their children at home.
2. parents as educational managers - monitoring homework or attendance, coordinating with other tutors, libraries, etc.
3. parents as socializers - learning and practicing new child rearing techniques.

School programs which facilitate these behaviors are the object of this study.

The means schools use to reach and work with parents were left open. The exact nature of the home activities with children or materials used were also left to be determined by what was found. The definition of student learning is intentionally open-ended as well, so as to include not only programs designed to improve student achievement but also those aimed at related behaviors such as attendance, school conduct, attitudes and motivation regarding school performance.

Home-school programs may be viewed as organizations with their own history, goals and structure. In a sense, we are attempting to develop a set of miniature case studies of organizations - their development, objectives, activities, staffing, resources and other essential characteristics. An important goal of our analysis will be to determine the likelihood of successfully transferring programs to other school districts. This requires consideration of the surrounding environment as well as the internal structure of

programs. Within the program, the key elements from the parent's view are their relations with the school and with the child. We will use this distinction in contemplating needed research.

Background

Three issues should be addressed before embarking on studies of home-school collaboration: is there interest among parents and educators in collaboration? what is the known utility of collaboration? and what related work is under way?

Recent evidence suggests there is strong interest, mixed with some ambivalence, in closer home-school relations. Most parents want to work closely with the schools in the education of their children (Gallup, 1980), even though some have difficulty doing so for a variety of reasons. Educators and educational organizations are also much interested in working with parents, as the recent formation of the National Coalition on Parent Involvement in Education attests. Nevertheless, an element of mistrust and discomfort also runs through the experience of many low-income parents in their dealings with the schools (Lightfoot, 1978).

A number of kinds of home-school collaboration have been developed, put into operation among pre-school and early elementary school age children and evaluated. Headstart, Homestart and their precursors have all been studied in detail. One overarching conclusion is the necessity for parent involvement to maintain educational gains (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Goodson & Hess, 1975). The continuation and elaboration of educational activities in the home is the key.

At the elementary school level, some Follow Through models emphasize parent participation. Some other elementary schools with a rich variety of parent participation also show dramatic achievement gains (Comer, 1978; Walberg, 1976), yet their many concurrent supplementary educational activities make it difficult to attribute the gains to any one form of participation.

At the upper elementary and secondary school levels much less is occurring. Most of the programs identified in this survey are relatively new, and one might ask why there is not a tradition of home-school collaboration programs at the upper grades. Part of the answer may lie in federal funding priorities which favor the lower grades, but part is also no doubt due to the difficulty of involving parents, school staff, and students in coordinated activities at these ages. The programs in place indicate that school systems are accepting this challenge.

Three ongoing related projects deserve special attention: the large national study of parent involvement being conducted by the Systems Development Corp., and two programs in the Basic Skills Improvement Program in the Education Department. The SDC study is examining various kinds of parent involvement in four federal programs: Title I, ESAA, Title VII bilingual programs, and Follow Through. Their information on parents as tutors from a phase one survey is brief, but a more intensive second phase may yield more descriptive information. Data will not be identified by location and most projects are in the lower elementary grades. A handbook for developing parent involvement projects is planned.

The Basic Skills Parent Participation Program encompasses a set of 30 awards for 1-4 year local projects to develop means by which parents working with schools can contribute to the educational achievement of their children. Materials development and training of parents are two common activities. All grade levels are eligible, though again the lower grades predominate. The Basic Skills office wants to obtain strong evaluative data on these programs, but since all were funded last fall it is too early to tell whether this will be possible.

A second Basic Skills project is identifying ongoing local programs under various auspices for parents to assist their children's achievement. A panel of experts will select the most promising ones and a guide for parents as teachers will be produced. The contractor, InterAmerica, is searching for programs through various channels, and hoping to find strong evaluations of them.

This project is closest to the present study though there are some differences. It focuses exclusively on basic skills improvement and parents in teaching roles where ours takes a broader definition of parents as educators. Our intensive contacts with the 24 largest city systems have given us detailed knowledge of a definable population whereas they have pursued leads to programs from many sources. Nevertheless, we have exchanged much valuable information in our concurrent efforts.

With this as background the structure of the present study will now be described.

The Study Design

The cities included in the study are listed in Table 1. They are all the cities with 1930 populations of half a million or more.

The process for approaching the school systems, and collecting and organizing the information can be described as a series of straightforward steps:

Step One: Initial Contacts

We contacted by phone at least three offices in each school system such as departments of curriculum and instruction and of federally funded programs. Where they exist we also contacted offices on secondary school programs, parent or community involvement and other relevant units. We tried to speak to the head of each office. They were asked to describe any programs which might fit our criteria, and send us any relevant program materials.

We excluded new programs (less than one year), programs in alternative or special schools, those operating in only one or two schools, and programs that involved parents as classroom aides or on school advisory committees. We were especially interested in programs designed to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged and minority families. Two cities, Phoenix and San Jose, have more than one school district. In these cases we selected several inner city districts for contacts.

Step Two: Site Visits

On the basis of this telephone survey we selected 12 programs to be visited by our contractor Vazquez-Nuttall Associates or our own staff. At each site visited by the contractor the following persons were interviewed:

1. At the central office - the program director, research director and any other key figures.
2. At each of two schools - the principal, the program director, and two teachers.

This was planned so as to view each program from a number of informed viewpoints. Core questions assessing the program were asked of each.

We requested schools where the program was working well, and where over half the students received free lunches. Beyond that, schools with contrasting grade levels or populations served were sought.

The overall program director's interview was the most detailed. It covered the history and development of the program, goals, program activities, staffing, staff training, target populations, costs and resource allocations, research and evaluation studies, and program transferability. The data from all interviews is then consolidated into a site report. These reports will serve as the basis for a report supplementary to the directory.

Step Three: Developing the Directory

This involved organizing information gathered under steps one and two into a directory entry format which could be submitted to program directors for any corrections or additions. The directory entries contain the same kinds of information requested in the program director interviews, namely: program objectives, major activities, staffing, target population, funding, evaluation activities, materials available and a contact person. The draft entry forms are now out to the programs.

Recognizing that our process may have allowed some qualifying programs to slip through the cracks, we also sent a follow-up letter with the selection criteria and entry format to public information offices in all those school systems where first contacts yielded nothing.

Step Four: Publication Plans

We expect to have the directory out before the end of this school year. At present count it will briefly describe about 25 programs. A supplement will follow which covers more facets and details of 10-12 programs visited.

Kinds of Programs Identified

We are still in the midst of collecting information. Some programs remain to be visited, and directory entries are being checked by sponsors for accuracy and completeness since the information obtainable by phone is necessarily sketchy at times. Therefore no counts of program characteristics are appropriate yet. Nevertheless, some patterns are emerging.

We have the most information on the programs which are candidates for or have been visited. These programs can be classified on several key dimensions: goals for students, modes of home-school interaction and major parent-school and parent-child activities.

The goals identified are to improve student achievement, behavior and social development, attendance and career planning. A majority of the observed programs emphasize achievement. Modes of interaction include parent-teacher conferences, parents working individually with teachers, parent education classes, the use of indigenous outreach workers, phone contacts, and special activities for parents such as school programs, trips and cultural events. No one mode of interaction predominates.

Major parent-school activities closely parallel the modes of home-school interaction. For example, conferences in Houston and Indianapolis are held city-wide in the fall, heavily publicized, and augmented with individual results of tests and tips for home study. The Houston Failsafe program will be described below, along with other somewhat diverse programs.

The last dimension is major parent-child activities. Direct instruction of children in the home is the most common. It is typically based on work books and exercises keyed to the student's grade level and classroom instruction. How much and how well these are used is an unanswered question.

Parents may also work intensively with teachers to learn how to use materials as is done in the Parents Plus program in Chicago. Other parent-child activities may involve parents practicing new child-rearing techniques learned at workshops, checking on homework and attendance, and engaging in trips and cultural events with their children sponsored or encouraged by the schools. Parent-teacher-student contracts to exert each's best effort for the benefit of student learning have also been tried in several places. Now brief descriptions of several programs will bring together these elements in different combinations.

The Houston Operation Failsafe

During the school year 1978-79 the Houston Independent School District launched a system-wide program called Operation Failsafe. Its core is a twice-yearly parent-teacher conference held during convenient hours for parents - sometimes in the mornings and until 8 pm on two consecutive days. Each school conducts its own campaign to attract parents to the conferences, and there was also a city-wide effort including business-donated billboard space.

The element which seems to have served as the greatest magnet for parents is the comprehensive academic profile printout prepared for each student. This has given the parent and teacher a very solid, individualized record as a basis for meaningful discussion. While attending the conference, most schools also offer other activities for parents such as health workshops, coffee klatches and cultural programs. As a follow-up to the conferences, Failsafe offers a series of materials called "Points for Parents" which can be used at home to help students improve their math and language arts skills.

At the secondary level, a big attraction for parents is the career development material which the schools provide, again individualized for each student. Using the career guidance materials provided by the school, the parent, teacher and student can all work together to help the student set career goals, arrange an academic or vocational program and work on any career related problems.

As far as has been determined, Operation Failsafe has been a great success. The program has generated wide attention and produced many materials which are commercially marketed, thus yielding some income for the school district. Surveys conducted by the district's R&D Division indicate that parents do participate in large numbers and are satisfied with the program. Teachers and administrators have expressed strong satisfaction with Failsafe and its results.

The Columbus Outreach Programs

The city of Columbus, Ohio has three outreach programs which seek to link parents closer to the schools. One called Pupil and Community Assistance Specialists is a system-wide program resulting from a court order to desegregate. PCA specialists work on a wide variety of home-school-community desegregation-related problems. The relative smoothness with which Columbus desegregated its schools can be attributed in part to the PCA program.

The second program, which is a state funded Title I model, consists of school based Home-School Community Agents who work with low income students and their families. Each specialist under this program works with about 30 students who have been referred by teachers, principals, or social agents because of the student's problem plagued history. The agents work intensely with the students, almost on a daily basis, on such problems as school attendance, academic improvement, motivation, student-teacher relationships, and even outside problems dealing with the law and other social agencies. It is the aim of the specialists to make the families a close partner in all of their efforts. Evaluations done by the school's R&D division indicate that the Home-School Community Agent program has been effective in achieving the above goals and in reducing the dropout rate. With the proposed decline in federal funds, this model takes on even greater importance.

The third program, Parent Coordinator Aides, is a Title I program which utilizes parents as a bridge between the home and the school. The parent aides are hired and supervised by the school principal. Aside from performing many support tasks within the school, they work with families on attendance problems, social agency referrals and any other difficulties raised by the principal, teachers or the parents. Evaluation required by Title I demonstrate that the Parent-Coordination have been very effective in the many problem areas they have attacked. One problem for the Columbus School System has been that

of territorial domain. Through careful definition of the territories and close monitoring by the supervising officials, this problem has been somewhat relieved.

Although the Columbus programs are not as directly related to improving academic performances, as say, Houston's Failsafe, taken collectively they do provide the parents and students a great deal of home-school and community support which reduces a lot of pressure on the student, thus permitting academic improvement to take place.

The Philadelphia Parent Partnership Program

This program is a concerted effort to involve all parents in the educational process of their children by coordinating existing programs and available means of communication with parents. It is composed of a number of components:

Parent workshops. Conducted throughout the school system twice a year, workshops help parents understand various aspects of child development, and make use of learning materials in the home. Recent workshops have featured school discipline, testing and other school-related topics.

Mini Workshop Series. Schools can request to have one of almost 60 workshops presented at their regular Home and School Association meetings.

Personalized reading and mathematics books. On request parents may receive graded materials in reading and math. Computer-generated booklets are also available to strengthen reading comprehension. These stories include references to the child and his or her friends.

Public awareness. Parents of school-age children are informed of the variety of program activities through print and broadcast media.

Data Line. A telephone resource center which provides assistance and information to parents and pupils related to home work, program activities and school services. A Spanish language hotline is also available.

More than 7000 parents attended 249 workshops held throughout the city in the last year. Most of the programs are operated at no additional cost to the school district. No evaluations of the impact of the programs have been conducted except for a study of the Data Line now in progress.

The Baltimore Project FAME

The goals of Project FAME in Baltimore are expressed in its acronym - Family Activities to Maintain Enrollment. Families were selected which had two or more children with poor attendance. The project is in an area with historically low attendance, and it took the challenge of enlisting families in support of good attendance. Two elementaries and their feeder middle school and high school are involved. Each of four paraprofessional family specialists works with up to 30 families making home visit and checking attendance daily. Since 1977, project activities have included Parent Effectiveness Training, counseling, peer tutoring, and family trips, and outings. Recently speakers have discussed alcohol, drug abuse and energy problems. Awards are given for good attendance.

Notes Toward a Comprehensive Program

Each of the programs described would seem to contain important features for promoting home-school collaboration even though there is little evaluative data on any of them at present. The Houston Failsafe conferences have been very well received, yet outreach workers as in Columbus may be useful also to reach those who still are not involved. Workers with outreach functions can probably also be used to good advantage with frequently absent students and their families as in Baltimore.

The multi-stranded program in Philadelphia suggests that a combination of approaches may be even more useful than one alone. Philadelphia's program addresses different parent needs - for information on school programs and policies, and child rearing advice as well as material for home instruction. It utilizes different settings - parent group meetings, individual conferences and a telephone hotline. And it mobilizes at least some community resources.

While it is an untested idea at present, a multi-stranded approach may be the most useful in meeting different parent needs and student needs. Some notes on the form of such a program follow. They cover the assumptions underlying a comprehensive program, potential objectives and suggested activities which would involve parents in a variety of ways.

If one's goal is to improve student learning through parent involvement in the educational process at home, then in designing a program a set of guiding assumptions reflective of the 1980's must direct the effort. Such a set might include the following assumptions:

A. Regarding schools.

1. Leadership at the district and school level must be committed to the goal and the plan.
2. Activities must be inexpensive for school systems.
3. All potential resources of the school and community should be explored and utilized. Staff orientation and training should be available as needed. Psychological and financial incentives should be built in.
4. Teachers and their representative organizations must be involved in planning and decision-making.

B. Regarding parents.

1. Activities must be voluntary, and respect the diversity of interests and circumstances of families.
2. Activities within schools should be open to all thereby lessening the stigma of parents being singled out because of their children's problems.
3. Activities must be organized to give parents a sense of equal status in collaborating to improve student learning.

A set of objectives and activities can now be stated. These draw heavily on the programs just mentioned and others we have observed, but no attempt to credit sources will be made at this point.

Objective 1. To establish channels for communication between schools and parents. Structures for communication are an essential starting point.

Channels might include:

1. Parent-teacher conferences. In the fall and spring semester before or when first report cards are sent out. Computers can be used to group conferences for parents with several children in the same school, and to print notices with suggested conference times for each family. Some conference time should be in the evenings for parents who cannot get released time from work.
2. School-community coordinators. Use to contact inactive parents, encourage their participation and determine their needs.
3. Parent workshops on learning-related topics.
4. A hotline for parent concerns and questions.
5. The school open house. To orient parents to all home-school collaboration opportunities.
6. The media. Radio, television, billboards, community newspapers, posters and flyers sent home to parents all have a place. Business and civic organizations should be persuaded to lend their support.

Objective 2. To exchange information and suggestions regularly between the home and school to promote the progress of individual students in both settings. Individual meetings between the parent and teacher or parent and outreach worker are the best opportunity for this. Information exchanged might include:

1. Student's school achievement, behavior, and attitudes toward learning.
2. Home learning activities of parents with their children and parents' expectations for their performance.
3. Suggestions of parents and teachers for ways to help children in the home and school.

Objective 3. To make available educational resources and strategies for parents to use with their children, especially in reading, writing and math skills. Parents want manageable educational ideas. Ongoing communication channels can be used to inform them.

Kinds of information and materials might include:

1. Recent test results.
2. Tips for home activities to strengthen weak areas. These could be computer-generated and keyed to test component scores.
3. Reading comprehension and math exercises developed for home use with parents at each grade level. Some school systems and other organizations have developed these.
4. Career development profiles, interest inventories, occupational aptitude test, career information.
5. Request that parents enforce a quiet time and provide a special space for doing homework.
6. A homework hotline might also be used by parents for information about home-school activities and to work jointly with their children on homework.

Objective 4. To maintain regular communication between parents and their children regarding school progress and parental assistance as needed.

Activities might include carrying out the ideas for parent-child relations introduced above such as:

1. Working together on material provided by the schools to bolster achievement.
2. Providing a special place and enforcing a regular quiet time for study.
3. Signing homework.

Objective 5. To provide auxiliary services for parents to support student learning. These services would be addressed to issues in parent-child relations, parent-community relations and child-centered problems which may also limit learning. Activities might include:

1. Parent workshops on parent-child relations (e.g. Parent Effectiveness Training), on child-centered problems (e.g. drug and alcohol abuse, discipline in schools, career awareness), or parent-community problems (e.g. consumer education, social agencies available).
2. School community coordinators might help parents obtain needed community services, and organize small groups of parents into self-help networks. A similar approach is being applied with parents of pre-schoolers in Syracuse, N.Y. in a program conceptualized by Urie Bronfenbrenner to consider the ecology of the child and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1980).

3. School events and trips to support family heritage and common culture identification and appreciation.

The selection and application of these various techniques will, of course, depend on the age and developmental level of the child - can you imagine an 11th grader submitting to having a parent sign his/her homework.

Needed Research

As far as can be determined, the programs reviewed to date have only been studied at one of two levels: the participation and satisfaction of parents and school staff, and the effects on student learning. The former, usually based on questionnaires and attendance counts, tends to be the more convincing, since a variety of other factors may influence learning and these are usually not controlled or taken into account.

Missing is any attempt to understand the process by which home-school collaboration makes a difference, if it does, in student learning. The process may be examined in two settings: parent contacts with schools, and parent relations with their children. For example, the expectations of parents and teachers and aspects of their interaction which lead to continued participation, satisfaction, knowledge of program goals and desired home activities need to be clarified. In the home one would want to see how the information gained is translated into activities and modes of interaction with children.

Perceptions of difficulties and successes in this process would be very useful for program improvement. Such information can be obtained by a variety of methods. Observational studies probably produce the most detail, but consent of families for extensive involvement may be a problem. Other feasible methods would include activity logs filled in by parents and telephone interviews perhaps soon after parents are likely to have been involved in school-sponsored learning activities with their children.

From the promising programs discovered in big cities and possibly other localities, a limited set of exploratory small-scale studies might be mounted on the effectiveness of such programs. These studies would utilize available information on parent involvement, student achievement and other factors, plus collecting new data as needed, to trace the immediate effects on parents and school staff in areas such as participation, satisfaction and new knowledge of how to help children. The studies would also trace the chain of events leading to possible student achievement gains and related behaviors including changes in parent-child interaction.

In view of the growing interest in and development of such programs for the upper grades, and the lack of firm knowledge on their effects, such studies appear very timely to help school systems improve their own programs and to guide others considering the adoption of similar programs. Studies might include cooperation between school systems and university researchers, and extend for several years. This would allow schools to utilize the evaluation data along with information from related studies to improve programs in a second year with subsequent study of the strengthened programs. Since big cities typically have large concentrations of low-income and minority families, the studies could focus on how well programs are working to improve their children's basic skills and related school performance.

Other related issues might also be explored to advantage:

1. How well previously uninvolved parents and those with low achieving students are being reached.
2. the needs and interests of parents who feel that education should be left to the schools.
3. benefits of programs in terms of public understanding and support for the schools, and any disadvantages in terms of feelings that schools are trying to relieve themselves of responsibility for student learning.
4. the costs of programs in relation to their benefits.

5. the role of contextual factors in the development and effectiveness of home-school programs in areas such as:
 - a. school policies and practices that limit or enhance collaboration
 - b. other school programs with similar student goals
 - c. teacher association support
 - d. competing demands on parents' time
 - e. peer influences on youth

Consideration of the ecology of the home and the school are seldom a part of studies in this area, yet they may be powerful factors in explaining program success.

This study of big city programs is not yet finished, and no doubt further refinements of research topics and strategies and their importance will occur. Nevertheless, this is an exciting area with much ferment and new, creative programmatic approaches. Now is the time to learn as much as possible about them so as to help systems that are planning along similar lines.

Table 1. THE LARGEST U.S. CITIES IN 1980 IN DESCENDING ORDER OF POPULATION*

New York City
Chicago
Los Angeles
Philadelphia
Houston

Detroit
Dallas
San Diego
Baltimore
San Antonio

Phoenix
Indianapolis
Honolulu
Washington, D.C.
Memphis

San Francisco
Milwaukee
Boston
Cleveland
San Jose

New Orleans
Columbus, OH
Jacksonville
St. Louis

* All cities with population of 500,000 or more.
Single exception is the inclusion of St. Louis.
Preliminary figures made it eligible but the 1980 official count gave
it less than a half million population. However, contacts were
already underway with its school system.

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